

The God of Abundance
Matthew 14:13-21
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One of the amazing things about the Bible is the way the authors tell a story, sometimes telling the same story in different ways. For example, we actually have four accounts of the life of Jesus, told by two eyewitnesses (Matthew and John), a faithful follower (Mark), and a physician looking to set the record straight (Luke). Because of these diverse writers, each gospel is told from its own perspective, and each differs significantly from the others.

In fact, did you know that only one of Jesus' miracles is told in all four gospels? It's not the calming of the sea or raising Lazarus from the dead or changing water in to wine. It's the feeding of the 5,000. To me, that lends credence to the authenticity of this miracle. If one eyewitness tells me they saw an elephant loose in Lincolnshire, I'd smile and quickly get as far away from them as possible. But if four people tell me they saw it, I'd be more inclined to believe it and to not eat any peanuts that day.

But that doesn't make the story any easier to explain, does it? As humans, we like problems we can solve and occurrences we can decipher, and this story from Matthew defies description. Some people have tried to rationalize it by saying that Jesus only gave each person a pinch of bread, feeding them spiritually rather than physically. Others say that when the disciples began sharing their food, the crowd, who had been hiding the food they brought, got it out and began sharing, as well. But both of those theories diminish the power of what happens here. Five loaves and two fish are turned into feast.

I can't explain this miracle. But I've experienced it, in fact several times. Growing up, every Christmas morning after we opened presents, my mom and I would join the rest of the family at my grandfather's house for breakfast. Now PawPaw had a very small shotgun kitchen, barely enough room for more than two people at a time. When we got to his house, I would run to the kitchen to see how things were going. On the counter would be a small bowl of batter, a carton of eggs, maybe a potato or two, and then PawPaw would shoo me out of the kitchen while he worked.

About a half hour later, he would call us all into the dining room, where he had turned that bowl of batter and those few potatoes into biscuits and sausage gravy, scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns and fried potatoes, buttered toast, pancakes and syrup. The more we ate, the more food appeared from that little kitchen. When we were all finished, there were enough leftovers to feed Santa and all his reindeer. We would sit back, pat our satisfied bellies, and marvel at how delicious breakfast was.

Now, as an adult, I know this wasn't a miracle. It doesn't diminish the meaning of the memory, but I know there was more food stored in the refrigerator and the pantry. But I still don't know how Jesus did it. I've tried to make sense of this story several ways, but it just doesn't fit into any of the math I learned in school. I've applied my trigonometry, my calculus, even my algebra, and nothing fits. I remember the old equations I would do for homework. If $2 \times X = 4$, what was X ? The answer, if I remember correctly, was 2. But that doesn't work here. Two fish and five loaves times Jesus equals everyone being satisfied and 12 baskets left over.

We can try to explain it a hundred different ways, but the point of a miracle is that it defies explanation. Sometimes faith defies explanation. Our lives get rudely interrupted by some crisis or detour, and we know we should have faith, but we can't quite figure out the equation. When everything that seems real is falling apart, when we are hungry for good health or stability or things to go our way, it's hard to be convinced that Jesus will feed you. There comes a point where our rational, analytical understanding stops, but because we're human, we still want answers, even when there are none.

I imagine if I were one of the disciples on that day, I would have had the same concerns they did. After all, Jesus wasn't considering the reality of the situation. In the passage just before this one, we learn of the execution of John the Baptist by King Herod. When Jesus learns about the death of his close friend and cousin, Matthew says, "He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." As you would expect, he wanted to be alone. But the crowds had no respect for Jesus' mourning. So they followed him, and Jesus, seeing the crowd, has compassion on them and restarts his work of healing.

As the day goes on, it's obvious that Jesus isn't paying attention to the details, because the time is getting late and Jesus hasn't even considered how all these people are going to get their supper. The disciples, being the rational, realistic bunch they are, bring this point up to Jesus, and he says, "You give them something to eat." Talk about something not computing! Jesus obviously hadn't learned his multiplication tables yet. Doesn't he know we only have five loaves and two fish?

You know, I have to stop and get mad at the disciples for a minute. I understand they are frustrated at Jesus, I know they are tired and hungry, too, but there's no need to cuss and use profanity like that. Did you hear it? That word, "only." That's a four-letter word when it comes to faith. I wonder how often we use that word. "I only have a few minutes." "I've only opened my Bible a few times." "I only know a little about my faith." The disciples use that bad word as an excuse, as if to say, "Well, if that's all we have then the equation is settled."

Do they not know about the Great Mathematician standing in front of them? Do we not realize that we worship a God who has rewritten the multiplication tables? Our God turns "only" into abundance. Our God takes what we have, no matter how small, and turns it into something we can share. Our God says, "You give what you have and let me worry about the distribution issues."

We all come to this place today with concerns, like we shared during our prayer time. Each of us has something in our lives that is weighing us down. Maybe it's a health issue or a financial issue. Maybe we're worried about an aging parent or a straying child. Now, let me ask you this: Do you have any hope in that situation? Are you completely hopeless, or do you see the possibility for a positive outcome? Even if you are 99% sure things will not go well, there's still that 1%.

And that's all God needs. "You give what you have and let me take care of the rest." But God, it's only a glimmer of hope. Whoops! There's that word again, "only." If we believe in a God without limits who can turn a small snack into a banquet feast, why would we limit our understanding of what God can do in our lives? We often choose to live with a mentality of scarcity instead of a mentality of abundance.

Here's the thing. In order for God's math to work in our lives, we have to be willing to give some things over. Jesus couldn't have multiplied the bread and fish had they not been given into his hands to bless, break, and share. The disciples could have

hoarded what they had, which would have ensured two things: (1) they would have had something to eat, and (2) no one else would have. I can't guarantee that God will always fix things the way we want them. But I can guarantee that God can't work with what we're not willing to give.

God doesn't multiply things in our lives so we can hoard them; they are to be shared, including the hope we have. By giving away what little they had, the disciples were given back 12 times as much. You know that thing I you are worried about? Someone else is worried about it, too, probably someone you care about. When God multiplies our hope it is contagious, and those around us feed off our faith in the midst of dark times.

You've probably read the true story about the Christian restaurant owner named Jerry who was shot during an attempted robbery. His wounds were deep and required 18 hours of surgery. When telling the story to a friend, Jerry said as he lay bleeding on the floor of his restaurant he realized he had a choice: he could choose to live or choose to die. When he got to the hospital and saw the looks on the nurses' faces, he knew he was in trouble. So when one nurse asked him if he was allergic to anything, he said, "Yeah, bullets!" Then he said, "I am choosing to live. Operate on me as if I'm alive, not dead."

You might think that Jerry only had a slim chance of survival. You may think you only have a little bit to share with others. You could conclude there's only a little hope of your situation working out well. But don't forget why you are here today. We believe in a God who sent us Jesus Christ to show us how much God loves us. We may not always understand what that means, we may not always be able to explain it, but when we look at the abundance in our lives, we realize that with our God, there's no such thing as "only."